



Perception of Environmental Consciousness in Vedic Literature

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Abstract - Environment is surrounding the whole gamut of diverse. It includes the land, water, vegetation, air and the whole range of the social order and covers all the disciplines that effect and describe these interactions. Our mother earth is currently facing a lot of environmental concerns like global warming, acid rain, air pollution, waste disposal, pandemic, water pollution, ozone layer depletion and many more affect every human, animal and nation on this planet. The Vedic literature give us the genuine principles to adjust with our environment and lead a spiritual life full of blies. While things have changed for the worse over time and contemporary society is for removed from the environment, ancient India is a splendid contract. Indian life rotates around Indian literature contain in Vedas, Upanishads, Epic and the Puaranas with Dharmshastras in the backgrowd. Veda is considered the main source of knowledge it is the need of the hour that we look back into our past and adopt the rich tradition that will enable us to live in harmony with nature.

Keywords - Rigveda, Yajurveda, Atharva Veda, Upanishadas, Aaranyaks, Brahmans, Bio-diversity, Ecological, Conservation, Atmosphere, Traditions, Spiritual, Consciousness, Sustainable.

Environmental conservation and natural resource management has been in the traditions of the Indian society, expressing itself variously in the management and utilization practices. This evolved through the continued historical interaction of communities and their environment, giving rise to practices and cultural landscapes such as sacred forests and groves, sacred corridors and a variety of ethno forestry practices. This has also resulted in conservation practices that combined water, soil and trees. Nature society interaction also brought about the socio cultural beliefs as an institutional framework to manage the resultant practices arising out of application of traditional knowledge. The attitude of respect towards earth as mother is widespread among the Indian society. Biodiversity is defined as variability and variety in life form including genes, species and ecosystems. Biological resources feed and clothe us and

provide housing, medicine and spiritual nourishment. Biodiversity conservation seeks to maintain life support systems provided by nature. There are many references scattered in ancient Indian literature emphasizing the conservation of environment. These references and descriptions go well with India's cultural heritage which in essence has been conservational in approach.

The Vedas are the best source of knowledge of ancient civilizations, and they are replete with instances of how learned men in those times devoted their lives to understanding the bond between nature and man. The very last volumes and annexure of the Vedas, which are also known as the Upanishads or Aaranyaks, also stress on the importance of prayer. For instance, the Mundakponishad states that meditation and deep thinking expands the human consciousness and that increases our productive capabilities. It implies that by adhering to these dharmic principles we uphold virtue and move closer to immortality. The Brihadaranyopanishad describes the creation of the cosmos. It says, "In the beginning, there was water everywhere. It is from this water that life originated. Lord Brahmha guided all creation and anointed Prajapati the King of all Gods. It was this Prajapati who then created the other Gods, who in turn melded the Life force into various shapes, colours and textures." This description is carried forth in the Taittiriya Upanishad, where the verses state that the universal consciousness created the sky, the natural environment and man and that this one singular soul was imbibed by every single creature created. Thus we are all one. But perhaps the most significant verse, for the purpose of our present discussion, is one from the Brihadaranyopanishad that clarifies that this universal consciousness that is responsible for all creation is none other than nature.

Rigveda especially mentions about environment on several occasions. A verse from the Rig-Veda states that "The sky is like father the earth like mother and the space as their son. The universe consistence of the three is like a family and any kind of damage done to any one of the three throws the universe out of balance¹." Vedic culture and Vedic scriptures reveal a clear concept about the earth's ecosystems and the necessity for maintaining their balance. Another verse from Rig-Veda says, "Thousands and Hundreds of years if you want to enjoy the fruits and happiness of life then take up systematic planting of trees." These verses carry a message to desist from inflicting and injury to the earth and embark upon constant a forestation for survival or else the ecological balance of the earth would be jeopardized. Rig Veda has dwelt upon various components of the ecosystem and their importance. "Rivers occasion widespread destruction if their coast and damaged or destroyed and therefore trees standing on the coast should not be cut off or uprooted." Modern civilization is experience the wrath of flood due to erosion of river embankments everywhere and only tree plantations along river banks cannot prevent erosion.

The Athrava Veda also mentions about the importance of the water and green plants essential for human existence. Although there was as such no concept of the word "Pollution" those days dust was referred in terms of "poisoning" of environment. The Atharv Veda recalls that three things cover the universe the air, water and plants and they are essential for all lives on earth to exist. "Plants and herbs destroy poisons (pollutants).²" Purity of atmosphere checks poisoning (pollution)³." Some herbs purify the air. The fragrance of guru (commiphora Mukul) purifies the air and cure diseases⁴. Athrava Veda has also warned not to dirty and add toxic substances into water bodies as it may lead to spread of diseases. "He

who dirties or spoils ponds, lakes, rivers, etc. or cause smell near residential areas is liable to chastisement.” This is very relevant in the context of pollution of rivers and lakes and the resulting ecological diseases which the modern civilization is experiencing. Great significance is being attached to the peepal tree with respect to environment. The National Botanical survey of India (NBRI) Lucknow has identified about 150 trees and herbs including peepal which are pollution fighters. They are able to intercept several toxic gases and dusts and also infuse the atmosphere with plenty of oxygen. Athrava Veda (12.1.11) hymn somewhere amidst deep forests reads. “O Earth ! Pleasant by thy hills, snow clad mountains and forests. O numerous coloured firm and protected Earth ! On this earth I stand, unslung and unharmed.”

The Yajurveda too mentions about plants and animals the ill effects of cutting of trees and the poisoning of the atmosphere. but it also discusses about energy relations of the global ecosystem. “No persons should kill animals helpful to all⁵.” “O King you should never kill animals like bullocks useful in agricultural or like cows which gives us milk and all other helpful animals and must punish those who kill or do harm to such animals⁶.” “The oceans are treasure of wealth protect them⁷.” “Do not poison (pollute) water and do not harm or cut the trees⁸.” “Do not disturb the sky and do not poison the atmosphere⁹.” About the flow of energy in the global ecosystem the Yajurveda says the whole universe is full of energy in which the sun is at the centre and the ultimate source of energy for all living organisms on earth. The net energy flows from the point of production to the point of consumption through the plants, animals human beings, the air, water and land is completely under the control of almighty. While energy flow and balance is maintained in the universe yet some imbalance this causes several natural disturbances like untimely rain, heavy rain, drought and flood, warm winter and cool summer. “The earth provides surface for vegetation which controls the heat build-up. The herbs and plants having union with sun rays provide congenial atmosphere for the life to survive¹⁰.” Now global warming is an established phenomenon. The carbon dioxide build up in the atmosphere (due to burning of fossil fuels) and the global deforestation are major factors of global warming. The green plants (forests) through the process of photosynthesis works as a natural sink absorbing all the carbon dioxide and help in reducing the warming effect. Green plants give out plenty of oxygen during photosynthesis and also directly absorb the solar heat radiation of the atmosphere to give out water vapour in the process of transpiration. The combined effects of the two process make the environment cool and congenial for survival of all life.

The Upanishads are the final stage in the development of Vedic literature consisting of answers to some philosophical questions. The Upanishads sages perceived the existence of God in trees and other plants and those they were gifted to man as a companion for natural survival. “The God who exists in the universe, live in air, water , in fire and also in trees and herbs, men should have reverence for them.” Brihadaranyaka Upanishad¹¹ equates trees with human beings as follows “ Just like a tree, the prince of the forest so the man is in truth. In the Taittiriya Upanishad¹² certain norms were prescribed for human beings to keep the environment clean. “One should not cause urine and stool in water, should not spit in water and should not take bath without clothes.” The Isopanishad has revealed the secrets of existence of life on earth and the importance of every organism for mutual survival. “The universe along with its creatures belongs to the Lord. No certain is superior to any other. Human beings should not be above nature. Let no one species encroach into the rights and privileges of other species.” These verses from the

Isopanishad uttered thousands of years ago is true and have become even more relevant today as the modern human civilization armed by the technological weapon made arrogant of his scientific knowledge and compelled by the every increasing greed for material achievement is systematically encroaching into the living rights of all other life forms on earth by using, misusing, exploiting and over exploiting the finite and scarce natural resources of earth. The concept of 'sustainable development' which the modern environmentalists are harping upon to use the natural judiciously for a more stable development and without impairing with the abilities of the future generations to use those resources and without interfering into their living rights was perhaps inspired by these verses of the Isopanishad.

The age of Upanishads was followed by the age of the 'Brahmans' text which elucidated aspects of human nature like the thirst for knowledge wisdom, respect for others, gratitude and other conduct within human society. Once again people began directing all their energies towards social intercourse and the pursuit of happiness, and became removed from their natural surroundings. But the more people pursued pleasure the more society was afflicted with violence, unhappiness, hurt, pain and general degradation. Power structures fell into the hands of people who had no respect for nature, and saw it merely as a source of personal riches. People entrapped by greed and arrogance, began competing for these resources.

The Pauranic literature belonging to 4th Century A.D. also contains messages related to the conservation of environment. In Narasimhapuran killing of birds for eating was prohibited. "O, wicked men if you kill a bird then you are bathing in a river, pilgrimage, worship and yagns are all useless." God Keshava is pleased with a person who does not harm or destroy other creatures or animals (Vishnu Purans). The puranas also recall the virtues of plants and trees and stressed on the need to tree plantations. "The inhabitants of a house which has sacred basil (*osmium sanctum*) are fortunate¹³." "The Yama do not enter a house where sacred basil is worshipped every day¹⁴." The Varah Puran says that One who plants a peepal, one neem, one Banayan, Two pomegranates, two orange, five mango trees and ten flowering plants or creepers shall never go the hell¹⁵. The practice of Vanmahotsava (Tree plantation ceremony) is over 1500 years old in India. The Matsya puran tells about it. Agnipuran says that the plantation of trees and creations of gardens lead to eradication of sin. In Padma Puran the cutting of a green tree is an offence punishable in hell¹⁶.

Water management and associated tree growing has been the subject of ancient text. Tanks have been the most important source of irrigation in India. Some tanks may date as far back as the Rig Vedic period, around 1500 BC. The Rig Veda refers to lotus ponds, ponds that give life to frogs and ponds of varying depths for bathing¹⁷. Reference to the tanks is also found in the Arthashastra of Kautilya. The Arthashastra refers to the ownership and management of the village tanks in the following verses : Waterworks such as reservoirs, embankments and tanks can be privately owned and the owner shall be free to sell or mortgage them. The ownership of the tanks shall lapse, if they had not been in use for a period of five years excepting in case of distress. Owners may give water to others in return for a share of the produce grown in the fields, parks or gardens. In the absence of owners either charitable individuals or the people in village acting together shall maintain waterworks. No one will sell or mortgage, directly or indirectly a bund or embankment built and long used as a charitable public undertaking except when it

is in ruins or has been abandoned¹⁸. The earliest scholar to have commented on the relationship of tanks and trees in Varahamihira who described the detailed technical instructions for the tank constructions in his famous work Brihatsamhita. Without the shade of the trees on their sides water reservoirs do not look charming therefore one ought to plant the gardens on the banks of the water¹⁹. Commenting on the species to be planted on the embankments of the tank, after its construction, Varahamihira writes : The shoreline of the tanks should be shaded with the mixed stands of Arjun (*Terminalia arjuna*), Vata (*Ficus benghalensis*), Aam (*Mangifera indica*), Pipal (*Ficus religiosa*), Nichul (*Nauclea orientalis*), Jambu (*Syzygium cumini*), Neem (*Mitragyna parvifolia*), Kurvak, Tal (*Borassus flabellifer*), Ashok (*Saraca asoka*), Madhuk (*Madhuca indica*) and Bakul (*Mimusops elengi*)²⁰.

In conclusion it is clear that the Indian consciousness has always recognized the power and supremacy of nature. While things have changed for the worse over time and contemporary society is far removed from the environment, ancient India is a splendid contrast. Ancient civilizations respected nature, as reflected both by their lifestyles and the complex web of mythology and legends that have been passed down to us from those days. This love for nature coexisted with a deep reverence for God. At regular intervals in history, societies grew more complex and less intimate with nature. Yet each time that human kind forgot the power of nature, it was only divine intervention that prevented certain apocalypse. Today's society, unfortunately, is neither nature loving nor God-fearing. We worship only material wealth and think nothing of exploiting our natural surroundings in order to increase this wealth. Today we are standing on the verge of another great cataclysm, but it is unlikely that God will intervene this time to rescue a people who have forgotten him and have discarded their traditions so completely. It is the need of the hour that we look back into our past and adopt the rich traditions that will enable us to live in harmony with nature. We must rediscover our roots, value morality and strength of character more than we value money and we must strive to follow the ancients path of virtue and righteousness, which will lead to God. The Mahabharata, Ramayana, Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Puranas and Smriti contain the earliest messages for preservation of environment and ecological balance. Nature or Earth, has never been considered a hostile element to be conquered or dominated. In fact man is forbidden from exploiting nature. He is taught to live in harmony with nature and recognize that divinity prevails in all elements, including plants and animals. The rishis of the past have always had a great respect for nature. Vedic message is clear that environment belongs to all living beings, so it needs protection by all, for the welfare of all.

REFERENCES –

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- 3 Ibid, 8.2. 25
- 4 Ibid, 19.38.1
- 5 Yajurveda, 13.37
- 6 Ibid, 13.49

- 7 Ibid, 38.22
- 8 Ibid, 6.33
- 9 Ibid, 5.43
- 10 Athrava Veda, 5.28.5
- 11 Brihadaranyakopnishad, 3.9.28
- 12 Taittiriya Upanishad, 5.101
- 13 Padampuran, 59.7
- 14 Skandpuran, 21.66
- 15 Varahpuran, 172.39
- 16 Padmapuran, 56.40-41
- 17 Rigveda, 5.78.7, 7.103.2, 10.71.7
- 18 Arthashastra, 3.9.32 – 35, 3.10. 1-3
- 19 Brihatasmhita, 55.1
- 20 Ibid, 54.119